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AUTHOR Pershey, Monica Gordon
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ABSTRACT

Noting that teachers' research is found in personal journals, professional conversations, computer networking, formal research studies, and publications or presentations, this paper answers, in outline form, a series of questions on the expanding role for special needs educators. These questions are: what "teacher as researcher" means; why teachers are becoming researchers in their own teaching environments; what (or who) the subjects of teacher research are; what some of the most common research methods and designs are that teachers use when researching their environments; how teacher researchers can find and frame a research question; what resources (articles, books, and other publications) can be consulted to learn how to become a teacher researcher, and what sources of support exist for teachers' research; and how teachers can start planning and networking today. Contains 34 references. (RS)

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TEACHERS AS RESEARCHERS: AN EXPANDING ROLE FOR SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATORS

Monica Gordon Pershey, Ed.D., CCC-SLP
Department of Specialized Instructional Programs
College of Education
Cleveland State University
Cleveland, Ohio 44115
216-687-4534
pershey@en.com

ABSTRACT: Teachers' research is found in personal journals, professional conversations, computer networking, formal research studies, and publications or presentations. Special needs service settings are natural "laboratories" for observation, reflection and inquiry.

What does teacher as researcher mean?

* To see one's job and profession through an inquiry stance
* To understand the individuals, actions, events, policies that make up one's job and teaching environment in order to make professional decisions (Patterson and Shannon, 1993)
* Learning about one's self as a teacher
* Learning about the experiences of the persons one teaches
* Goals: To improve teaching practices used

  To improve career satisfaction and professional development

  To improve learning environments
* Becoming a part of a learning community by reflecting, reading, talking, and writing about professional practice

  Schon: Reflecting in action

  Reflecting on action

  Reflecting on practice
* Determining what the content and substance of this discourse will be

  Discourse may include:

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Solo reflection: journaling, creating a teaching portfolio (paper or computer-based), memoirs

Talk and group reflection: conversing, telling and hearing anecdotes and stories about practice, meeting informally, attending formal meetings and presentations

Writing and group reflection: dialogue journal or polylog (a notebook for collaborative reflection on practice, passed from teacher to teacher)

Through all of these means, teachers hold their teaching experience up as an object to be thought about, analyzed, and learned from. Subjectivity as well as objectivity are valued. Teacher research encompasses teachers' perspectives.

* Seeing for one's self what education, learning, and teaching are about

* Becoming a teacher as learner, questioning the world around one's self and questioning one's own actions

* Devising a process and producing a product -- qualitative or quantitative, utilizing multiple data sources

* Seeking to optimize growth for one's self as a professional

* Seeking to optimize growth for one's students

* Measurement and evaluation may or may not be a part of it

Why are teachers are becoming researchers in their own teaching environments?

* To enjoy their work more -- career satisfaction, workplace enhancement

* To renew inspiration

* To find voice, communicate, and be heard in a learning community

Patterson:

Learning is social and transactional

Spoken and written discourses mediate learning (Vygotsky)

Reflective inquiry fuels teaching and learning

Through discourse, teachers become communities of learners, and, by studying this discourse, teachers learn about the complexities of teaching and learning

Variety, challenge, growth

To read and write our professional lives

* To enhance their visibility in the eyes of the administration and/or community

Accountability

To affect bureaucratic and policy decisions

* To collaborate to achieve success

Working together to achieve outcomes that are more difficult to achieve alone

Employing constructivism, contextualism, and site-based decision making to effect school improvement

To address the assessment vs. assistance dilemma in teacher-student and administrator-teacher relationships

* To foster change and utilize new teaching approaches

To change the way one's classroom or teaching sessions are conducted: to view teaching and learning differently; to apply different learning and assessment practices and examine the effects (e.g., practices that are learner-centered, constructivist, and transactional lend themselves to classroom research)

To build a reflective classroom

To model lifelong learning to students

To critique practices and policies

To redefine what it means to teach and be a teacher

To transform our schools and communities

To provide students with better instruction, more teacher attention, or otherwise improve how their needs are met

* To document student outcomes

* To contribute to the knowledge bases of our professions and participate as equal partners in the discourse of the professions (See Mohr, 1996)

* To be empowered to ask why, (or how, what, etc.) on one's own terms

* To make a difference

* To evaluate professional performance of one's self, peers, subordinates, or superiors

What (or who) are the subjects of teacher research?

* One's self - ideas, reflections, growth experiences

* Teaching Practices - methods, materials, instructional strategies, models, interventions, curriculum -- one's own or that of others

* Students - single students or populations of any number; data on student performance

* Environment - classroom, school, peers or team, policies, families, community; program evaluation; occurrences such as traffic and interaction patterns in a classroom or school, social climate, teacher supervision and/or evaluation practices; looking at time usage and scheduling patterns

* Artifacts - items in the teaching environment, such as curriculum guides, policy statements, students' work samples or portfolios, teachers' portfolios, data sets like test scores; also building layout, room arrangement, contents of a library or media center, other documents

* Reports of other teachers' research

* School restructuring attempts

What are some of the most common research methods and designs that teachers use when researching their environments?

Branching off from Naturalistic Inquiry and Ethnography is Action Research: research that does not separate the investigation from the actions needed to solve a problem (pioneered by Kurt Lewin, as described by McFarland and Stansell, 1993). Teacher researchers are action researchers, who explore their worlds through a variety of means, some of which are:

* Journals -- note their "jobs" facilitating thinking about teaching (Isakson and Williams)

    Bookkeeper: to keep track of what one has done and aims to do better -- enhance service to students

Mentor/friend: self-reflection, confiding

Peer learner: serve as an example to others and see their examples (dialogue, polylog)

Detective: searching to see what makes sense in the classroom

Cheerleader: to keep one going when feeling down, losing sight of progress -- to maintain one's self as a teacher

Story teller: the story of trying something new; the story of a certain child or family; the story of how a certain child learned or made progress -- stories tell of conflict and resolution or change

* Teaching Portfolios, Teaching Autobiographies
  Teachers pull together samples of their teaching and other professional accomplishments and write about their observations and growth experiences. Community service, parenting, and statements of personal philosophies make the autobiography personal. Entries include writings by peers, mentors, friends that reflect on the teacher as these persons know him/her.

* Audio and Video Tapes of Practice
  Verbal or written evaluations and reflections by one's self or one's peers are prepared. May be part of the Portfolio or Autobiography. Applicable to clinical supervision.

* Think books
  Teachers write reflectively and repeatedly on a certain topic. Later, analysis and editing make parts of it publishable.

* Focus Groups (Observer or Participant-observer)
  Observers of a certain phenomenon come together for discussion and preparation of a monograph, report, or article on an issue. This is informative rather than persuasive.

* Case Studies (Observer or Participant-observer)
  Observations of a student, a group of students, a class, or a school are recorded and analyzed. The researcher may be an outside observer or a participant in the setting where the study is taking place. Method in place for determining how observations correlate. May include tests of student learning. May be paper and/or multimedia formats. May be a comparison of more than one case. Should include an analysis of the context in which the case is operating.

* Interviews, Discussions, Conferences, Surveys, Questionnaires, Opinionaires, Inventories,
  With students, parents, peers, and other professional associates -- documentation, analysis, reflection.

* Participants' Journals
  Differ from the researcher's journal that the teacher keeps, this is kept by students or other research subjects

* Developing and Implementing New Models of Teaching
  Teachers meet repeatedly over a period of time to establish data on a teaching model that they believe they'd like to adopt. Consultation with users of this model and with university researchers of this model take place. Teachers read about the model and attend conferences or workshops; electronic newsgroups are consulted to solicit other views; and parent input is considered. Minutes of meetings and summaries of other interactions and readings are kept. The strength of this data will suggest that the teachers' grass roots decisions to implement a new teaching model is based on well-founded information. Presentations to administration or parent groups will be solid. This is persuasive as well as informative data to lead to program design, development, and implementation. (See Donoahue, 1996)

* Descriptive Review (Perrone, 1991)
  Team report of a child's status based on multiple data sources.

* Strategy or Materials Analysis
  Evaluate the utility of a teaching approach or strategy or of the use of new teaching material(s) -- a reading series, a trade book, a computer program, a website. Qualitative analysis (summary of interviews with students and teachers and their points of view) or quantitative analysis (survey or questionnaire with percentages of certain responses noted) may ensue, singly or combined. May be a pre-post usage comparison.

* Vignette Writing
  Persons who have participated in an experience write out a short vignette -- a recounting of a key episode in this experience -- and reflect on what this event means to them. For example, a student learning about the Civil War recounts how he learned that slaves were denied learning how to read and write. As a dyslexic student, this is meaningful to him, and he writes a vignette about how he learned this fact and how he felt on that day, and why it made the study of the Civil War meaningful to him.

* Data analysis
  A collection of data is analyzed and overall comparisons and trends are determined. For example, a group of teachers meets to review all of their students' reading test scores over the past three years. Gains in reading abilities are noted since teachers have started using a computer-based reading-writing program. Teachers review published research on this program, compare all of the outcome data found with the data they have collected for three years, noting overall comparisons and trends.

* Manuals, Instructional Modules, Websites, etc.
  Innovations to enhance practice.

* Single Subject Experimental Research (Neuman & McCormick, 1995)
  Differs from a case study in that the researcher deliberately manipulates conditions, for example alternating treatments, to generate causal or correlational information.

* Historical Studies
  Comparison of past and present phenomenon.

* Literature Reviews
  A synthesis of information on a given topic or question.

* Outreach
  Newsletters, letters to the editor, articles in the popular press, and posting Internet information on important educational topics require lots of preparation to achieve accuracy and provide information value. The acts of preparing these pieces and disseminating information to the public at large are acts of teacher research.

The research that one undertakes helps one discover where to go next in learning about teaching and learning.

How does one find and frame a research question?

* Observe a real-world situation or dilemma

* Acknowledge questions that arise in one's teaching setting

* Ponder what is important to one's teaching -- address a felt need

* Think about what is causing tension

* Think about visions of change

* Think about comparisons that can be made

* Allow questions to arise gradually and take on different forms as they are reconsidered over time

* Wander to get in touch with wondering (Hubbard & Power, 1993)

* Are you more concerned with big issues for your setting or more interested in smaller, more specific problems?

* What has been going on in staff development at your setting? What aspects of staff development matter to you most?

* Are you active in a professional association? Does the group have research needs?

* Think about something that is intriguing

* Think about what you see that is effective and what is not

* What is your intuition saying lately?

* Think about processes and relationships -- the interactive aspects of teaching

* What have you been meaning to experiment with?

* What problems would you like to look for solutions to?

* What training or skills would you like to acquire?

* What have you and your colleagues been working on lately or have been meaning to work on?

* Think about questions that have more than "yes" or "no" answers

* Does your question fit with local conditions?

* What sort of support will you get for your inquiry? Time? Money?

* Are your questions somewhat proximal to your current level of learning? Does your knowledge, by and large, approach what you will need to know to begin?

* Are your expectations reasonable -- not too big?

* Consider your own needs for rejuvenation - what will help?

* Does your inquiry pose any risk?

* How will you celebrate your benchmarks and successes?

* Who can you get to review and react to your work while it is in progress or completed?

* How and where will you share your findings?

* Journal or note take for a while and look for themes that keep coming up

* Do you predict that your data will tell a story that you will want to and be able to write? (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992)

* In time, set specifics: How broad or narrow is the question? What are the parameters of the investigation? What is beyond the scope of this investigation, though one is still curious about it?

* Draft questions using good openers: "What happens when..." "What is the role of..." "How do..." "What procedures..." "What is the difference..."

What resources (articles, books, and other publications) can be consulted to learn how to become a teacher researcher? What sources of support exist for teachers' research?

ERIC has published 54112 entries that, in some way, address teachers as researchers...

It is also possible to:

* Form consultation networks with peers

* Enroll in college courses

* Attend seminars and conferences

* Join professional organizations (ASCD, IRA, AACTE)

* Seek research awards and grant funding

* Access information electronically through world wide web sites, newsgroups, e-mail list serves

Can we start planning and networking today?

* Yes, indeed!

(1) Form a group of 3 to 4 persons. Obtain one transparency and pen per group.

(2) Talk about your research ideas. Use paper to start to outline, diagram, web, plan a flow chart, etc., to get your ideas flowing. Wonder aloud and confer together.

(3) Then, select one of your ideas to write or draw on the transparency. Talk together to elaborate this plan.

(4) Reconvene as a large group. Share your overhead, telling us all about the ideas you have at this point. It's ok to be vague, unsure, and in process. Your questions are more important than your answers!

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PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

Monica Gordon Pershey, Ed.D., CCC-SLP is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at Cleveland State University in Cleveland, Ohio, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in language and literacy instruction. Dr. Pershey is also in private practice as a speech-language pathologist.